



Highlights

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HIGHLIGHTS OF PRESS CONFERENCE HELD ON ONGOING DEVELOPMENTS OF THE FIFTH REVIEW CONFERENCE OF STATES PARTIES TO THE BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS CONVENTION ON 7 DECEMBER AT THE PALAIS DES NATIONS

Ambassador Tibor Toth of Hungary, President of the Fifth Review Conference of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction, briefed journalists on the latest developments concerning the three-week Fifth Review Conference. The briefing took place at the Palais des Nations on 7 December. The Review Conference, which opened on 19 November, is scheduled to conclude on 7 December.

In opening remarks, Mr. Toth said, among other things, that currently 75 per cent of the text of a draft final declaration was consolidated. That was the good news; the bad news was that the remaining 25 per cent, as everyone might understand, was text that had gone through several rounds of debate, and its elements posed tough challenges for reaching consensus.

There were three critical questions: follow-up; assessment of the work of the Ad Hoc Group mandated in 1994 to develop a draft protocol to the Convention on the issue of compliance/verification -- whether or not the group should resume its work; and non-compliance with the Convention. He had tabled a proposal related to follow-up. On the assessment of the Ad Hoc Group, there was a proposal from one country in particular, and a set of other proposals on the table. On non-compliance, the situation was more complicated, Mr. Toth said; in fact everyone could drop the word "bit". There was a clear difference of opinion among delegations on what language would be preferable on this matter.

From 10 a.m. today, the Conference's Drafting Committee would continue to further consolidate the draft text, Mr. Toth said. Concurrently, he would hold consultations on the three critical areas he had mentioned; his assessment was that technically the work was "do-able", but the question was whether delegations would have the willingness or the ability to compromise to do it.

Journalists asked a number of questions. In response to a query about what the differences were on the non-compliance issue, Mr. Toth said there was an approach suggested by the United States to place very heavy emphasis on respect for the basic obligations of the Convention; other countries did not accept the points made by the United States; further, they felt that if the final declaration reflected that there were concerns about implementation and nothing was being done to redress the situation, it amounted to an acknowledgement that the Convention was not able to handle non-compliance, that violations in effect were tolerated. The Chairman of the Drafting Committee had proposed language for the final declaration that would emphasize the importance of compliance, but the text had not been accepted.

At this stage, it was not the idea of the United States to mention specific countries, Mr. Toth said; what was in the US proposal, however, was not acceptable for the countries known to be concerned. The US wished to make the specific point that certain countries were not abiding by the Convention, even if they were not named in the declaration.

In response to a question, Mr. Toth said it was indeed possible a declaration would not be adopted; he hoped, however, that the necessary significance was attached to agreeing at least on a core of "understandings" emanating from the Review Conference. A total absence of an agreement would of course be against the expectations of politicians, especially after what had happened in September.

Mr. Toth went on to say he did not think the Conference would continue on Monday, but it was possible the meeting would continue tonight and possibly into early Saturday morning. If the will was expressed, the deadline could be extended.

Mr. Toth said that he had proposed annual meetings of States parties between the five-year review conferences to deal with two functions -- to assess implementation, and to consider new measures for strengthening the Convention; there also was the possibility of setting up subsidiary bodies to carry out various projects, such as establishing potential mechanisms and preparing for the review Conferences. There was a proposal to have informal consultations to prepare for such an annual meeting in 2002.

An influential developing country had proposed referring "indirectly" to the Ad Hoc Group on a compliance/verification protocol, and to the relevance of the instructions given to that group, in the Conference's final document, Mr. Toth said; that formulation might generate consensus. It was an informal proposal, and he didn't want to name the country that had suggested it.

There was no precedent in the history of the review conferences for having no final declaration, Mr. Toth said in response to a question; in previous periods, in between the review conferences, some activities were going on; those activities were relatively narrow in scope; if a final declaration could not be reached, however, the matter of how to follow up would have to be considered, in view of the tradition of inter-sessional activities.

Asked about "bargaining chips" during the negotiations, Mr. Toth said there were certain elements in the draft text which might be termed bargaining chips, including some related to confidence-building measures and how specific or generic such measures should be; with those and certain other topics, in other words, journalists should not read too much into the fact that the concerns were still being kept open -- that they had not been agreed on.

He expected a long day of negotiations, Mr. Toth said -- and possibly a long night.